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ABSTRACT

In an informal experiment, ten pairs of passages covering a range of writing (poems, narrative prose, legal writing, "educationalese," anthropology, and literary criticism) were presented to two sections of freshman English and two sections of a graduate seminar in which the students were primarily experienced high school and college instructors. Students were asked to choose the "professional" writer and to explain their choice in a few sentences. Their responses indicated that mature reader/writers responded to content, global development, coherence, tone, audience, and voice. They also made sophisticated inferences about stylistic and rhetorical effectiveness. Weaker writers, who preferred student writing to professional writing, used criteria like smooth, flowing, easy to read, a rigid sense of preexisting rules of form and style, grammatical correctness, and personal, subjective responses to content. It would seem that weaker students learn what is taught them and what they learn gives them a model of literacy that helps them to behave in ways that make it harder to master literacy. This dilemma can be overcome by providing the students with access to models of reading and writing in a variety of ways, integrating the teaching of reading and writing, and providing the students with alternative criteria for judging their reading and writing. (HOD)

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Writers as Readers

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Writers as Readers

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Several years ago I began experimenting with a technical writing and advanced composition assignment borrowed from Virginia Tufte at the University of Southern California. The assignment asks students to choose a piece of their own writing, about 250 to 300 words in length, and to compare it with a similar piece of professional writing, using a set of word-counts to isolate features of the two passages--words per T-unit, words in free modification, polysyllabic words, and so on. I ask students to work with the kind of writing they plan to do professionally--but poems or narratives are encouraged, along with transactional prose that might range from legal writing to urban planning reports. I ask students to choose professional writers whose prose they enjoy, and thus the comparison allows students to develop fairly explicit guidelines to move their writing in directions they want it to move.

I soon began asking students to turn in the two passages without identifying the professional, and I went over the two passages with each student, guessing the professional writing and, more generally, commenting on what I noticed as I read. I found I could usually pick

the professional writer (except, curiously, with passages of children's literature), and I began dittoing the unmarked comparisons for the class, asking each member to judge each passage. It proved illuminating to ask students to explain why they made each judgment in a short sentence or two. I wasn't surprised to find that the success of my advanced composition students in this reading task roughly matched my sense of their writing ability, for I think what I'm isolating is what Richard Ohmann has called a reader/writer's underlying stylistic competence, the set of expectations, models, and strategies that inform both one's reading and one's writing, just as linguists speak of the linguistic competence underlying speaking and listening.[1] Put another way, dipping gingerly into the vocabulary of cognitive science, I'm isolating a reader's schemata for making value judgments in reading, schemata that, I'll suggest, also inform their value judgments in writing.[2] Put more specifically, our reading of a Victorian novel, say Trollope, is informed by our expectations about Victorian novels, and about Trollope, built up from our prior reading, and our writing of, say, literary criticism is tacitly controlled by what we expect literary criticism to be, just as the writing of our students is constrained by their experience in reading and their models of "freshman writing."

With this in mind, I selected ten pairs of passages, covering a range of writing--a pair of poems, three narrative sets, some legal writing, some educationalese, some anthropology, and some literary criticism--and began to present them to freshman classes, asking students to choose the "professional" writer and to explain their choice in a few sentences. I picked passages in which I felt the professional was clearly superior in quality, even though the level of the writing of the advanced composition students was fairly high. But identifying the judgment as between "student" and "professional" led freshmen astray, for they searched for secret clues--like "able to use a semi-colon"--rather than responding more generally to the issue of quality in writing, and it proved much more fruitful to identify the task as, "here are pairs of comparable passages; read each pair and decide which is the better written, explaining your reasons in a sentence or two."

I want to report informally on an experiment giving this test of judging ten pairs of passages to two groups: two sections of Freshman English (49 students) and two sections of a graduate seminar, "Teaching Basic Writing," the students primarily experienced high school and college instructors enrolled in our doctoral program in rhetoric and linguistics (27 students).[3] I give results, in tabular form, in Appendix A: the freshmen ranged from 7 correct

identifications to none, with a median of 5 correct and an average of 4.7 correct; the graduate students ranged from 5 correct identifications to 10, with a median of 9 correct and an average of 8.1. Freshmen had trouble across the range of passages, but particularly with the narrative passages and the poem; graduate students had a particular problem with the legal writing and with a pair of passages on education--on the other passages they were correct better than 85 per cent of the time. (Thus I feel justified in speaking of the professional writer as the "correct" answer.)

I'm not particularly interested in offering this experiment as a completed project. But the raw data has a certain interest. When asked to choose the better writer from a pair of passages, experienced teachers will, by and large, choose a professional writer instead of a student writer. Of the five graduates who mis-identified four or five passages, four were high school teachers, and the grounds of their decisions seemed to rest on formality of language, supporting Joseph Williams' findings that high school teachers tend to prefer heavily nominalized prose, while college teachers tend to prefer more direct prose.[4] In an interesting experiment, Sarah Freedman found that college teachers, grading answers to typical freshman assignments that were written by professional writers, did not rate them higher, on a holistic scale, than answers by freshmen, although they were rated higher on an analytic scale.[5] I suspect the

differences in our findings grow out of the differences in the task assigned: her readers were asked to respond to freshman themes, mine to quality in writing. The results of the freshman sections, however, are even more interesting. When asked to choose the better written of two passages, freshman students will, on the whole, choose the writing of an upper division student rather than the writing of a professional. In other words, their intuitions about style will consistently lead them in the wrong direction--at least if we assume that the right direction is writing for a community of interest beyond the English classroom.

I'm more interested, though, in uncovering the models that reader/writers use in making such judgments, models revealed in the criteria that the subjects used when they explained their choices in a sentence or two. Such comments build up a reader/writer's model of what <u>good writing</u> is, and I'll later suggest that the same model may explain some of the features of the writing of those readers. For this purpose, I'll isolate the fifteen freshmen who misidentified from 7 to 10 of the answers as "weaker reader/writers," the ten freshmen who missed only 3 or 4 of the answers as "better reader/writers," and the graduate students as "mature reader/writers." There's some overlap between the judgments made by freshmen and by graduate students, but the two groups used quite different criteria to reach those judgments.

The quality most admired by weaker reader/writers is defined by a set of terms that cluster around "smooth, flowing, easy to read," and "didn't have to think very hard." I link these terms together, since the weaker reader/writers often linked them, or else they used them separately to judge different passages. The better reader/writers also used "smooth and flowing," but they usually omitted "easy to read"--one better student correctly identified one passage as "smooth, flowing, and better to read." The graduate students occasionally used "flowing," but usually with a precise reference to an awkwardness in the other passage. I suspect, therefore, that a "flowing style" means something quite different to each of the three groups. For the weaker reader/writers, a flowing style didn't challenge the reader; it didn't slow its movement with qualifications or clarifications or even punctuation; it was--and here they unconsciously parody the criterion of E. D. Hirsch's Philosophy of Composition--"easy to read."

The second criterion applied by weaker reader/writers was a fixed, rigid, and dogmatic sense of form and style, applied as an absolute, without any sense of context, appropriateness, or communication. Any professional who dared use I was damned out of hand, again and again, and common standards to dismiss professional writing were, "contains no topic sentence," "does not end paragraph with a summary," and "begins paragraph with but." Narratives

were often misjudged by "uses lots of adjectives" or "uses lots of adverbs." Equally rigid criteria were used to dismiss the complexity and elaboration of the style of professional writers--"sentences too long," "too much repetition," or "too much punctuation." Weaker reader/writers liked big words--indeed they rejected as inappropriate anything that veered even slightly toward the vernacular.

The third criterion applied by weaker reader/writers was grammatical correctness; it accounted for twenty-five per cent of the judgments made by these students. Of these judgments, about one in ten correctly identified a grammatical error, a series of sentence fragments used by one of the professional writers. Most of the time, then, the weaker reader/writers demonstrated that they didn't understand the grammatical principle they were citing. Long sentences were called run-on sentences; short sentences were called fragments. One student criticized three passages for containing fragments; when we conferenced about his responses we figured out that, since he'd once been corrected for punctuating a <u>because</u>-clause as a sentence, he'd generalized a rule) "any unit of words containing <u>because</u> is a sentence fragment." Another student dismissed a passage--a student passage by chance--with "uses <u>like</u>" (ignoring the fact that this <u>like</u> was a verb).

(There's a paper growing out of that finding--that when weaker reader/writers cite a rule of grammar of written English they are wrong ninety per cent of the time. Its argument runs like this, "rules of grammar can only be understood by those who have already internalized the rule of grammar." That is, if you've internalized a way of approaching the code of Edited American English, then you can understand an explanation of what you've internalized. If you haven't internalized the code, you will misunderstand the explanation--well, ninety per cent of the time, anyway.)

Finally, weaker reader/writers were unable to respond to printed text as a universal audience; they responded only in terms of their own feelings and values. In Piaget's terms, they were unable to de-center beyond their immediate experience.[6] An opinion on contraceptives written by Justice William O. Douglas was rejected by 10 of the 15 weaker reader/writers on personal grounds--"I disagree," wrote one student succinctly. (The other 5 weaker reader/writers complained of the informality of his language.) Once weaker reader/writers left the firm grounds of grammatical correctness (however misunderstood), rigid concepts of form and style, and whatever they meant by "smooth, flowing, and easier to read," they had only personal opinion--"I liked passage one"; "I agree with passage two." This inability to abstract from the text was most evident in a pair of narrative passages, one the beginning of Saul Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March, the other a particularly vapid piece of student writing.

Bellow's Augie March isn't a very nice guy--he mixes levels of diction, slipping from complex allusions to a street vernacular, and, more to the point for weaker reader/writers, he doesn't love his mother. None of the weaker reader/writers identified Bellow as the better writer; they complained that they couldn't understand, or they responded personally to the persona of the character. In fact, only four of the fifty freshman correctly identified the professional, while all but one of the graduate students was correct.

More generally, the better freshman reader/writers were able to respond to content at a more sophisticated level: where weaker reader/writers responded personally or in terms of "understandable" or "easy to read," better reader/writers responded more impersonally ("makes a point," "develops ideas well"). Better reader/writers tended to judge from a rhetorical or "global" sense of form, rather than citing pre-conceived notions ("follows through precisely"; "sticks to the main idea"). Better reader/writers noticed things like coherence and development, though usually not in those terms. They relied significantly less on grammatical correctness for their judgments (less than ten per cent of their responses, as opposed to twenty-five per cent for the weaker reader/writers), and they tended to be more correct in their identification of error. They made personal judgments, but they couched them in more neutral terms--

"more interesting" rather than "interests me more," for example.

And the college and high school teachers? Well, these particular students had a fairly sophisticated background, and their vocabulary frustrated me at times--one student, who identified all the passages correctly, offered the argument, "uses better rhetoric," five times. But, more generally, these mature reader/writers responded to content and to global development; they made sophisticated inferences about style; and--almost entirely missing from the freshman answers--they emphasized voice and tone and assumed context.

Let me summarize at this point. Mature reader/writers responded to content, global development, coherence, tone, audience, and voice, and they made sophisticated inferences about stylistic and rhetorical effectiveness. Stronger freshman reader/writers responded to content, to a larger sense of form and development, and to a presumed general level of interest. Weaker freshman writers, who preferred student writing to professional writing, used criteria like "smooth, flowing, easy to read," a rigid sense of pre-existing "rules" of form and style, grammatical correctness, usually misconceived, and personal, subjective responses to content.

The freshman responses were useful to me as a classroom teacher. I met with each student, not to discuss right or wrong answers, but to articulate, from the criteria used, the student's model of what made up good writing, and, as the semester progressed, we often referred back to that model to discuss changes in the student's attitudes.

In the longer paper that's developing out of this research, I suggest a second way to access students' models of reading and writing, and that is to accustom a class to free writing, non-stop timed in-class writing, and then to ask them to free write on such topics as, "what's the difference between writing and speaking?" "how do you go about writing?" "tell me about the paragraph," and "what's the connection between writing and speaking?" I then validate my claim that there are connections between models of reading and writing and writing performance by examining the work of several students. For example, one weaker reader/writer judged the student-professional comparisons with a rigid sense of paragraph form, and the same rigid sense dominated his free writings on topics like, "tell me about the paragraph." I found this attitude to be connected with his inability to develop paragraphs and also connected with his tendency to misread discursive prose.

I can make the same point more quickly, though, by turning to a third way of accessing students' models.

Page and Pinnell, in Teaching Reading Comprehension, discuss an informal experiment in which fourth grade students were asked to write brief answers to three questions, "why do people read?" "what do people do when they read?" and "how do people learn to read?"[7] The experiment isolated the students' models of reading rather effectively, and Frankie Miller, of Delaware Technical and Community College, found the same questions equally effective with college students and with adult students in basic literacy classes. Accordingly, I asked students to respond to parallel questions, "why do people write?" "what do people do when they write?" and "how do people learn to write?" I have data from several third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classes, from one ninth-grade class, and from several college Freshman English classes. Here are representative answers to one question, "what do people do when they write?" First, elementary students labeled by their teachers as "better reader/writers":

- When they begin they think of stuff to write.
- They think of what they are going to write. They ask a person if it sounds good.
- They really open there minds and futures.
- They share their thoughts with someone.
- Some people write storys and poems so you wont be bord.
- They relax.
- Think and learn.
- Write letters to thery frendes. Write letters to you'r Grandmother.

Compare the answers of elementary students labeled "weaker reader/writers":

- They hold the pendil tightly.
- They sit up straight.
- They write people name.
- Make letters.
- Thcy waste ink or lead.
- Move there fingers. And write neat.
- They moiv there hand and they moive the pencicle.
- Hold the crat.
- They have a piece of paper and a pencil.
- People our suposed to sit down when they write so they dont mess up there paper.
- After they write it they make sure it's neat. They copy it down.
- They write letters and numbers.

Here are representative answers from a ninth-grade class to "what do people do when they write?" First, better reader/writers:

- They tell about things like a story about someone or something or even theirself.
- They get stuff across to other people.
- Actually, their making symbols and shapes to stand for words.
- They use their mind to guide their hand to express their thoughts.
- They get stuff across to people or they entertain people.

Ninth-grade students labeled "weaker reader/writers":

- Just write stuff down on a piece of paper.
- The hold a pencil and move their hands.
- They put the point of the pencil to the paper and start making words and letters.
- Think about what there going to say.
- They use up extra energy.

Note the same pattern with college students.. Those labeled "better reader/writers":

- They are conveying thoughts and ideas.
- People explain their ideas, theories, stories and imagination with each other when they write.
- People try to translate their feelings or beliefs on paper.
- When people write they often do so to express their opinion or ideas. When you write you don't have a time limit and you can take your time and express yourself in the best possible way.
- I think that when people write they sometimes reveal thoughts and feelings which would otherwise be locked inside them.
- When people write they are expressing themselves in a way unlike no other.
- What I think people do when they write is to go to another world, another dimension. Writing lets you experience all sorts of things, and it is all at your fingertips.
- . . . . Often it is a way to relieve their anger.

College freshmen labeled "weaker reader/writers":

- They gather information, organize it, and then supposedly make sense out of it.
- They express their view.

- People write through English grammar, punctuation, etc.
- When people write they combine any previous knowledge on the subject with research information.
- Carefully arrange sub units under a main topic in a logical, easy to read manner.
- First you pick your topic, then you make sure that you have enough information. Then you rewrite and check the spelling and copy it down.
- Using correct usuage and grammer.
- When people write they verbally express themselves through ideals, comments and personal experiences. They express their overall views on the given topic and later draw conclusions in a patterned coherent fashion.
- They think of a topic and of things to support it.
- They make contact between the head of a pencil or pen to paper or other serfaces. They make letters that form words that other people can read and understand.

A first question about this data: where do weaker reader/writers get this model of writing? Answer, as valid for college students as for fourth graders: they master the emphases of school grammar and current-traditional rhetoric presented to them by their teachers and textbooks, just as the weaker reader/writers in my student-professional comparisons used the same criteria--a rigid sense of form and style, and a strong emphasis on grammatical correctness. In other words, the weaker reader/writers learn what they are taught. The better reader/writers somehow go beyond the precepts given them, to grasp something of the dynamic nature of a commitment to literacy. Now, one might argue

that the first stage--the rules of writing, as it were--is a necessary prerequisite for the second stage; "first you have to learn the rules and then you can go beyond them." But that's not supported if you compare the responses of fourth-graders with those of ninth-graders and college students, for the same models appear at all levels, gradually becoming more sophisticated, but not losing their basic form.

A second question, even more incisive: what do weaker reader/writers do if they want to become better reader/writers? Answer, using the fourth-grade responses: they hold the pencil more tightly, they sit up straighter, they spell their letters more neatly. Answer, using the responses of the weaker reader/writers to my student-professional exam: they try to get grammar correct, though they're mistaken about what "correct" means; they try to obey all the rules of form and style, to write paragraphs with topic sentences that don't begin with <u>but</u>; they try to sincerely interest their reader by being "smooth, flowing, and easy to read." In other words, the more they try, the less they improve, because their models of reading and writing enforce behaviors that are counterproductive to the mastery of adult literacy.

What do better reader/writers do if they want to improve their reading and writing? They become more sensitive to content, they respond to global elements of form, they recognize the responsibility of a universal audience, and

they gradually improve their sensitivity to voice, tone, and the contextual dynamics of communication. "Writing lets you experience all sorts of things, and it is all at your fingertips." Of course they improve their reading and writing--precisely because they have internalized a model that allows them to do so.

This, then, is the dilemma: only our weaker students learn, or mislearn, what we teach them, and what they learn gives them a model of literacy that helps them to behave in ways that make it harder to master literacy. The straighter you sit and the more neatly you spell, the less you learn.

There are ways out of this dilemma, and let me suggest a few. First, the main point of this paper is that we can access these models of reading and writing in a variety of ways, and we can use these models in conference and in the classroom. If students believe in "easy to read," we can show them that longer sentences are often easier to read than shorter sentences, and we can make them aware of the contract between writer and reader. If the student believes that any long sentence is a run-on sentence, we can show the student the difference between a long sentence that's effective and one that's ineffective, pointing out, incidentally, if we want, what a run-on sentence is. That is, once students articulate models, we can work to modify those models.

Second--and I won't try to develop this point--we can search for better ways to integrate the teaching of reading and writing. But I might note that the student I mentioned above--the one haunted by a rigid model of the paragraph--was able to break through to better written development by means of a series of exercises that forced him to respond in more complex ways to written paragraphs.

Third, we can provide students with alternative, and improved, criteria for judging their reading and their writing. In the simplest terms, we can return rhetoric to the teaching of composition. Class discussion of sentence combining exercises, for example, is an obvious point to introduce rhetorical criteria--if the teacher is able to use them. Or, we might try to reduce their emphasis on form by stressing content and invention. In this regard, I was particularly interested in a recent dissertation by Susan Nugent of Keene State College.[8] Professor Nugent compared the effectiveness of two methods of invention, the Odell heuristic derived from that of Young, Becker, and Pike, and the prewriting system devised by Rohman and Wlecke. As part of her comparison, she asked four students to compose orally before and after being trained in using a heuristic. In the pre-sessions, the students directed over sixty per cent of their energy to form-centered comments; after being given a heuristic--either of the two under study--the students shifted their energies to invention, and of course their writing improved.

Fourth, and most importantly, we can convince students that one learns by writing, that writing and thinking are not distinct, but interinanimate. The weaker reader/writers at the college level, asked to free write on the topic, "what's the relation between thinking and writing?" were adamant that there was no relationship; "first you think and then you write." The better reader/writers worked, however tentatively, toward a more complex model. They recognized writing as a mode of discovery.[9]

Now, I don't think we can do this--have students learn that one learns by writing--by telling them. That's precisely what's wrong with current-traditional rhetoric, the assumption that we can uncover laws and rules of writing and transmit them to students. But I think we can provide a context in which students can discover, for themselves, the real values of literacy and of a tradition of literacy. The context of a classroom or lab where the instructor writes (and learns), where writing is shared, where writing is discovery. A context in which assignments have some connection with the real world, where standards of judgment are those of the community, not the quirks of the individual teacher. A context that is open to the dynamics of reading and writing, open to the force of communication, open--he concluded slyly--to language.

Notes

[1] Richard M. Ohmann, "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style," Word, 20 (1964), 423-439.

[2] See, for example, Richard C. Anderson, "Schema-Directed Processes in Language Comprehension," in Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge, ed. R. C. Anderson, R. Spiro, and W. E. Montague (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977).

[3] Three graduate students, speakers of English as a second language and not experienced teachers of composition, are omitted from the data.

[4] Joseph Williams, "Non-Linguistic Linguistics and the Teaching of Style," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade (Akron, OH: L&S Press, 1979), 24-40.

[5] Sarah W. Freedman, "A Comparative Evaluation of Student and Professional Prose," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April, 1979. ERIC ED 172 217.

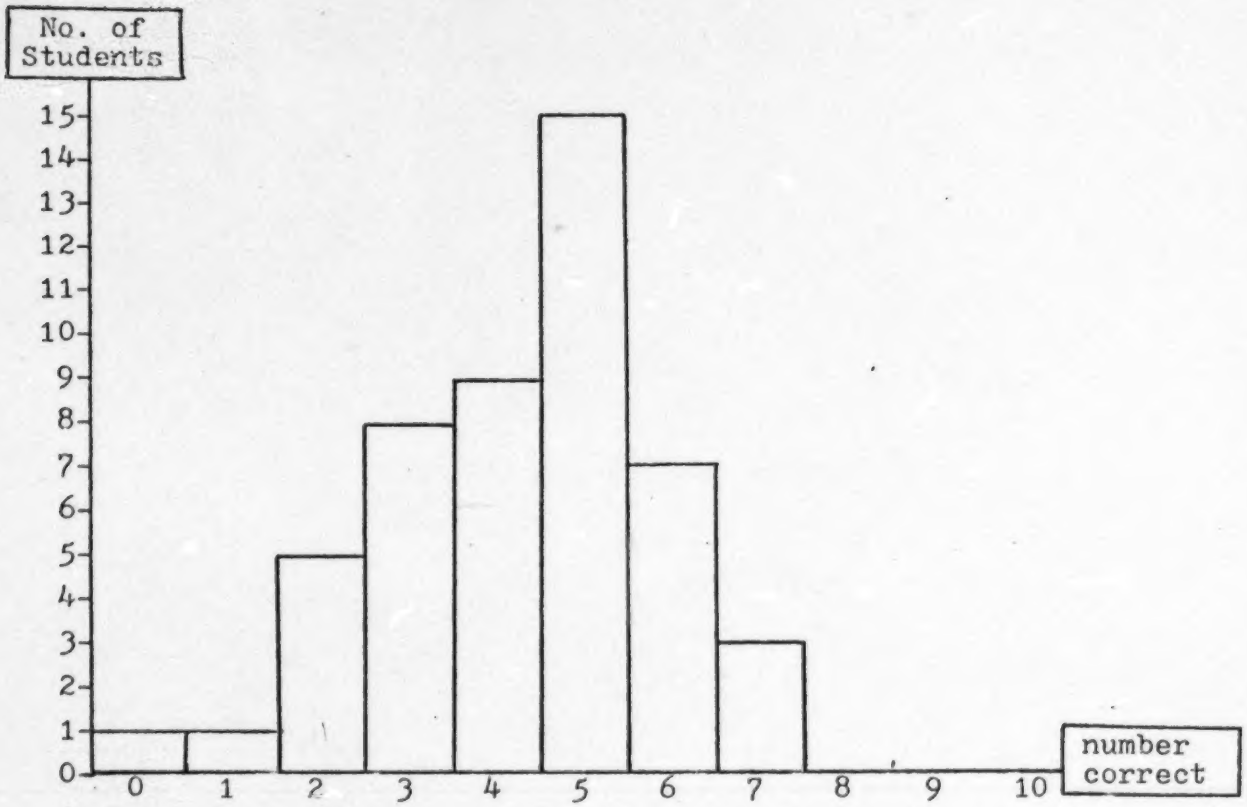
[6] For a sensitive discussion of de-centering and the basic writer, see Andrea Lunsford, "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), 278-290.

[7] William D. Page and Gay Su Pinnell, Teaching Reading Comprehension (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979).

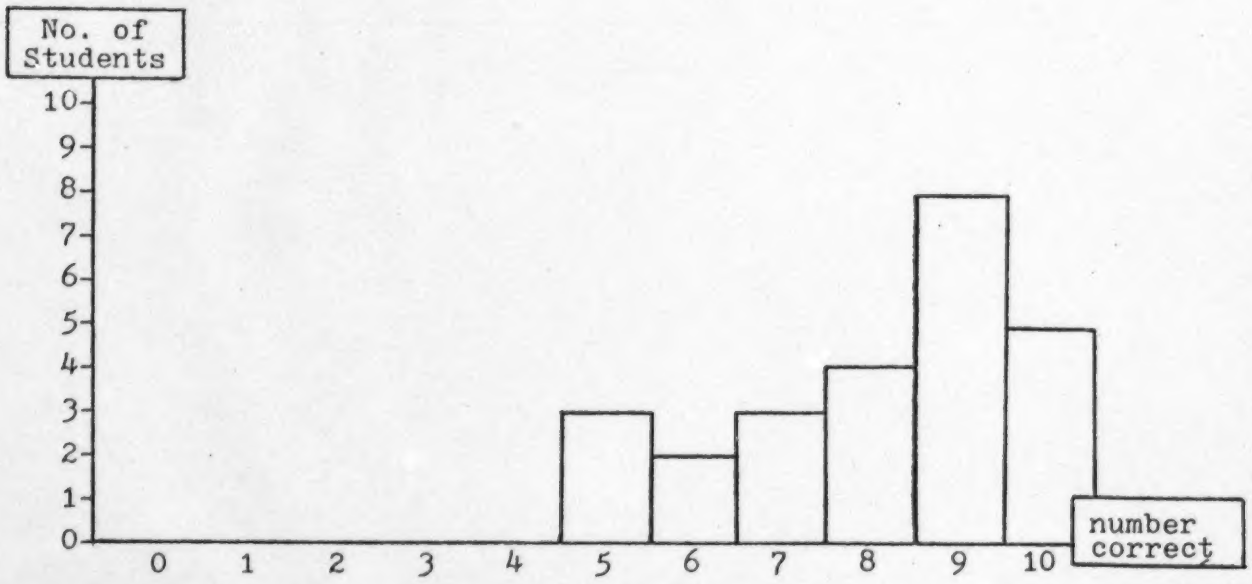
[8] Susan Nugent, "A Comparison of Two Methods of Teaching Rhetorical Invention," Ph. D. diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1980.

[9] For sensitive discussions of writers' models of writing, see two pamphlets from the London University Writing Across the Curriculum Project, Nan Martin, et al., Why Write?, and Peter Medway, et al., From Talking to Writing (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1973), available in the ERIC microfiche files as, respectively, ED 177 555 and 177554.

Appendix: Test Results



Freshman Students (n = 49)



Graduate Students (n = 27)